Journal X

Volume 3
Number 2 *Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 1999)*

Article 2

2020

Othello's Monsters: Kenneth Burke, Deleuze and Guattari, and the Impulse to Narrative in Shakespeare

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1.

Writing half a century ago, Kenneth Burke argued that to one degree or another all persuasive discourse obeys a "principle of courtship" whose purpose lies in "the transcending of social estrangement" (208). As Burke explains this principle,

> [i]n its essence communication involves the use of verbal symbols for purposes of appeal. Thus it splits formally into the three elements of speaker, speech, and spoken-to, with the speaker so shaping his speech as to "commune" with the spoken-to. This purely technical pattern is the precondition of *all* appeal. And "standoffishness" is necessary to the form, because without it the appeal could not be maintained. . . . Rhetorically, there can be courtship only insofar as there is division. (271)

Burke identifies this primordial and self-sustaining "standoffishness" — which corresponds roughly to the notion of desire in Lacanian psychoanalysis and to that of *différance* in Derridean theory[1] — as a defining element of "pure persuasion" (269) and as an irreducible quality of self-interference present to one degree or another within all rhetorical performance.

No major work of English literature better exemplifies the courtship-function of rhetorical appeal than does Shakespeare's *Othello*. As Alan Sinfield, for one, has observed, the play's "action advances through a contest of stories" (30) whereby Iago's tale

of adultery undoes what Othello's tales of travel and heroism have achieved for him. Thus, although *Othello*'s preoccupation with narrativity has been established by a number of previous critics,[2] I would like to reexamine it in light of Burke's analysis and the concept of "standoffishness" that grounds it. My points in conducting this examination are three. First, I believe that if *Othello* comprises an extended act of courtship, the self-interference intrinsic to that act is concentrated disproportionately within a single dramatic role: that of Iago. Second, I would note that, in his capacity as the principle of rhetorical self-interference incarnate, Iago repeatedly conceives the act of union as a violation of perceptual categories: not only those of race and nationality but also of rank and gender and ultimately of species itself. In terms of this latter point, it would be easy to see Iago's obsession with violated boundaries as voicing a generalized anxiety over the collapse of social categories, in which case *Othello* begs to be read, in Burke's phrase, as a document of "'social lewdness' mythically expressed in sexual terms" (208). However — and this is my third and final point — the interest in crossing lines is not Iago's alone, and when it appears in the language of other characters it figures not so much as a transgression to be shunned but rather as a consummation to be wished. To this extent, it embodies a rhetorical impulse for the elucidation of which we must look beyond the work of Kenneth Burke to the more recent theoretical writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, where it surfaces as the principle of deterritorialization.

2.

In a reading of *Othello* that figured, on its first appearance, as one of the foundational documents of the New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt has drawn notice to the play's "ceaseless narrative invention" (235), an invention that tends both to convert eros to storytelling and to translate storytelling into eros. For Greenblatt, *Othello*'s characters "have always already submitted to narrativity" (237), and thus the tale of Othello's doomed love for Desdemona is, among other things, also the tale of Desdemona's love for the tale of Othello's life. Othello himself narrates matters as follows, nesting the story of his life within the story of his love within the scene of his trial within the play of his undoing:

> I spoke of most disastrous chances:
> Of moving accidents by flood and field,
> Of hair-breadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach,
> Of being taken by the insolent foe
> And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
> And portance in my [travel's] history;
> . . .
> These things to hear
> Would Desdemona seriously incline;
> But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
> Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,

She'ld come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse. (1.3.134-9, 145-50)

This passage gives us Burke's principle of courtship in triplicate, at least: Shakespeare woos his Globe audience with the tale of Othello, in which Othello woos another audience — the Venetian senate — with the tale of Othello wooing yet another audience — Desdemona — with the tale of Othello. Nor is Desdemona the only character to experience the erotic pull of this overdetermined narrativity; as the Duke observes of the Moor's performance, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (1.3.171). The express tendency of the narrative drive in this scene is toward a union simultaneously rhetorical and erotic in character. Thus when Othello reaches out to the Venetian senate by recapitulating his act of outreach to Desdemona, readers and viewers of Shakespeare's play, too, participate in a pattern of storytelling superimposed upon itself, reencountering itself in different settings so that the very act of listening to the Moor's tale becomes an act of structural communion with other listeners in other contexts, all of whom seem to repeat the originary model of Desdemona, devouring up Othello's discourse.

I say that this structural repetition *seems* to originate with Desdemona, but in truth it does not. In fact, Desdemona's role as Othello's archetypal audience derives from yet another, prior model: the aggrieved Brabantio himself. Again, Othello's account of his love for Desdemona provides the central evidence here:

Her father lov'd me, oft invited me;
Still question'd me the story of my life
From year to year — the [battles], sieges, [fortunes],
That I have pass'd.
. . .
These things to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline.
(1.3.128-31, 145-6; emphasis added)

This storytelling, the effect and extension of Brabantio's "love" for Othello, becomes in turn the catalyst, extension, and — as Desdemona plucks up her spirits and asks Othello to tell more stories directly to her (150-5) — effect of Desdemona's love for the same man. The storytelling-relation-that-is-also-a-love-relation is apparently no respecter of genders; developing between men, it simply reimprints itself within the dynamic of heterosexual courtship before transferring itself, in further turn, to the legal context of Othello's trial and to the theatrical context of Shakespeare's play. The result is a kind of courtship one cannot adequately describe in terms of the masculine homosocial dynamic that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others have viewed as exemplary of much Shakespearean love-discourse. In that dynamic women tend to serve as the markers of a prior and supervening attachment between men,[3] but for Othello the attachment is not so easily stratified into the relation of privileged signified (a man's love for another man) and subordinate signifier (a man's relation to a woman related to a beloved man). Rather than standing *for* Brabantio, Desdemona in an important sense *becomes* him.

In doing so, I would argue, she threatens to attain the condition of absolute communion that comprises the ideal end of Othello's rhetoric: a condition in which fathers and daughters, senators and groundlings, tales and their innumerable retellings all coalesce, achieving a polymorphous reciprocity — perhaps, given the erotic nature of Othello's storytelling, even a polymorphous perversity — that nullifies the social and psychic divisions presupposed by the rhetoric itself. This condition especially transcends the fundamental distinction between speaker and auditor, a point manifest in Desdemona's response to Othello's tale:

> She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
> 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
> She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
> That heaven had made her such a man. (160-3)

The line "she wish'd / That heaven had made her such a man," with its famous syntactical ambiguity, points toward the dissolution of personhood that results from successful rhetoric and successful courtship. Poised against the possibility that heaven might indeed make Desdemona such a man — in one sense of the phrase or another — is Desdemona's own unwillingness to hear a story that is difficult to endure precisely because it assails the bounds of her being. As Burke has remarked, there can only be courtship so long as there is division. Desdemona's reluctance to hear the story that fascinates her serves simultaneously to register the attraction of the promised communion and the anxiety that it provokes.

Yet it is in the figure of Iago that this anxiety takes up particular residence, with the result that Iago initiates the dominant counter-movement of Shakespeare's play: a concerted pattern of resistance to the principle of communion exemplified by Othello's rhetoric. At bottom, it is Iago's job to sustain division, and by sustaining it to sustain all the varied rhetorical operations — the innumerable acts of courtship and appeal and solicitation — that presuppose it. Thus, where Othello's storytelling marks a primary moment of conjunction whereby father and daughter, Brabantio and Desdemona, achieve equivalence in their relation to the Moor, Iago nurtures a sense of loss:

> Awake! what ho, Brabantio! thieves, thieves!
> Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags! (1.1.79-80)

And again,

> ['Zounds], sir, y'are robb'd! For shame, put on your gown;
> Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul. (86-7)

And later, employing the same pattern of imagery to arouse jealousy in Othello:

he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed. (3.3.159-61)

Iago's fascination with money, with getting it and spending it and hoarding it and stealing it, is of course a staple of his character. My point here is that this fascination registers more than material profit and loss; it registers linguistic loss as well, a linguistic loss well represented by the theft of one's "good name." Moreover, once it is abstracted from particular material transactions and contexts, the preoccupation with what is missing informs Iago's behavior on a grand scale. For instance, recent scholars in queer theory have rightly cautioned us not to read early modern literary documents as expressive of a binarized economy of heterosexual and homosexual desire, an economy that it is anachronistic to ascribe to early modern sexual thought and social practice;[4] yet, in an almost uncannily prophetic way, Iago himself encourages just this sort of binary impulse by organizing the personal relationships of Shakespeare's play according to the laws of urinary segregation. He gets along famously with men, after all, and his facility in managing Roderigo and Cassio and Brabantio and Othello contrasts both against his invidious, highly charged relations with Desdemona and Emilia and against Othello's initial solidarity with Desdemona. In effect, Othello's belief in the existence of a fictive love triangle between himself, Desdemona, and Cassio serves as the *ex post facto* expression of a real, preexistent triangle between Iago, Othello, and Desdemona. This latter triangle, in turn, receives double consecration in Othello's holy union with Desdemona and in the "sacred vow" (3.3.461) with which Othello and Iago later seal their confederacy. This vow, almost a homoerotic betrothal ceremony,[5] renders the binarisms of Iago's character into a structural principle of Shakespeare's play; Othello may either choose his wife or his ancient, his woman or his man. In either case, gain goes hand in hand with loss.

Nor does Iago's preoccupation with loss confine itself to questions of gender; it operates equally on the level of genre, where Iago's language displays a clear preference for certain modes of articulation, certain speech acts. Although Greenblatt has viewed Iago's villainy as a kind of "narrative fashioning" that extends and recapitulates the narrative preoccupations of other figures (237), one remarkable feature of Iago's character is the way in which it stakes out pet modes of expression distinct from those of other characters, particularly Othello. Thus, where Othello tells tales and gives commands, Iago offers advice, solicits advancement (or complains about its absence), issues warnings, and negotiates agreements. These latter are all classic gestures of courtship, in Burke's sense of the term, and of courtiership as well; thus they are appropriate to a figure who inhabits a divided world, who fraternizes mostly with men, and with men whose interaction is governed by intricately devised systems of military and courtly rank and protocol. In any case, Iago's language is populated by signature gestures of appeal and solicitation, beginning with his first long speech ("Why, there's no remedy. 'Tis the curse of service; / Preferment goes by letter and affection" [1.1.34-5]); continuing through his cultivation of Roderigo ("I hate the Moor. . . . Let us be conjunctive in our revenge against

him" [1.3.366, 367-8]); and extending ultimately to his successful temptation of Othello himself ("You would be satisfied? . . . / Would you, the [supervisor], grossly gape on?" [3.3.393, 395]). In effect, where Othello says "Let me tell you a story," Iago says "Let me make you a deal."

This discursive preference, in turn, entails certain consequences on the level of character. With his repeated petitions and promises and offers and incentives, Iago displays certain affinities for the "comedy of non-interaction" that Gabriele Jackson has identified in Ben Jonson's early work (1). For Jackson, the characters of Jonsonian comedy are "sundered from the outside world by urgent attention to an inner clamor" (26); they ricochet off of one another like billiard balls while in pursuit of the idiosyncratic obsessions that define them. As for Iago, a similar dynamic invests his dealings with others, since those dealings are consistently predicated upon the furthering of individual suits. Whether the suit in question is Iago's own (his failed quest for military promotion; his successful quest for revenge) or someone else's project pursued with his encouragement (Roderigo's effort to seduce Desdemona; Brabantio's legal action against Othello; Cassio's petition to Desdemona for aid in regaining his lieutenancy), the dramatic actions associated with Iago are all of a piece, involving the pursuit of an *idée fixe* under whose influence the suitor in question somehow loses the ability to communicate with others. Even Iago himself, whose capacity to recognize and capitalize upon the obsessions of others is of course formidable, seems unable, in the end, to understand that his wife might find his villainy intolerable; this is, at the least, a major lapse in judgment. For the suitor entangled in a project of the sort encouraged by Iago, the project itself becomes a means of establishing and maintaining a certain personal distance, and once again, that distance is the very sort without which rhetoric as courtship would be unthinkable.

To this extent, we may in fact regard Othello and Iago as complementary expressions of the two contradictory imperatives that invest and sustain rhetoric according to Burke's formulation of the matter. On one hand, Othello embodies the impulse to commune, to unite, to extend and escape the self in ways that ultimately entail a rewriting and eventually an unwriting of personal identity. On the other hand, Iago exists to keep the self — and selfhood — intact; he employs language to maneuver for personal advantage, and he does so by generating and exploiting various kinds of misunderstanding. Indeed, Iago's discursive habits are almost a parody of Othello's. The Moor's stories change their audience by enforcing an exchange of identities, a kind of cross-pollination whereby speaker and listeners enter and inform one another; Iago's plots and agreements, conversely, are founded upon the *illusion* of exchange, upon the hearer's misguided apprehension that there has been a meeting of minds where none has actually occurred. As for the idea that minds — or bodies, or selves — might actually achieve a state of dynamic mutuality, Iago has a notorious way of imaging this possibility, and it is to this pattern of imagery that I now turn.

3.

In his compendious *Institutes of the Laws of England*, Edward Coke concludes his brief discussion of the crime of buggery by noting that this "detestable and abominable sin" (sig. I3v) was first criminalized during the reign of Henry VIII. Uncharacteristically, Coke explains the Henrician anti-buggery statute via anecdote; it was formulated, he observes, because "a great Lady had committed Buggery with a Baboon, and conceived by it, etc." (sig. I4r). Coke does not name his source for this story, and its concluding "etc.," suggesting both the inevitable and the unimaginable, equally tantalizes and infuriates. From the late-twentieth-century standpoint, of course, the monstrous birth that Coke describes is a biological impossibility, and yet its very factitiousness renders it all the more unnerving. A narrative invention that exceeds the possibilities of the world as we know it, Coke's baboon-child simultaneously embodies a social regime's anxieties about transgression of the order of nature and figures forth the unselfconscious determination of that same regime to transgress the nature that grounds its anxiety.

As for the anxiety itself, I have already argued that Iago lends concerted expression to something very similar: an obsessive concern with the possible loss of the self and the language that subtends it, a concern represented in large part through febrile fantasies of gender- and race- and species-mixing. These last are perhaps Iago's most notorious turns of phrase, and they draw upon the same uneasiness and the same patterns of thought that inform Coke's baboon anecdote. For Iago, the miscegenous lovemaking of Othello and Desdemona threatens to produce just the same sort of denatured conception; being "cover'd with a Barbary horse" (1.1.111-2), Desdemona will become the dam to a brood of centaurs; Brabantio will "have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans" (113), and the scions of his house will not speak but neigh. Such stuff owes its origin to a twofold discursive tradition: on one hand a pattern of legal and theological thinking (exemplified by Coke, among others) that conceives various sexual conjunctions as socially and morally objectionable because they violate a variously conceived order of nature, and on the other hand a medical discourse (well represented by the obstetrical texts of Ambroise Paré)[6] that purports to document the monstrous results of such unnatural unions (see figure 1). Working with the two separate but interrelated strands of this tradition, Iago can

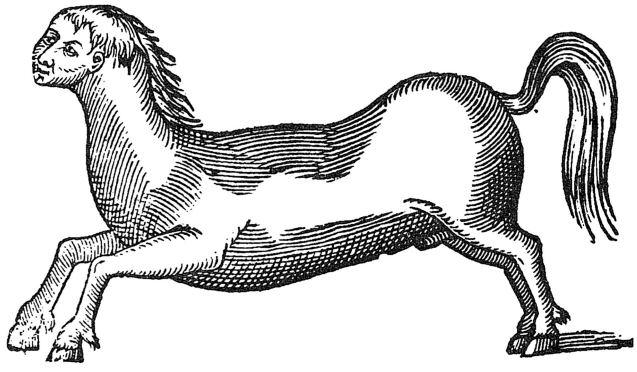

Figure 1. Figure of a colt with a man's face, from Ambroise Paré, On Monsters and Marvels *6. Cf. Othello* 1.1.111-3: "You'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans."

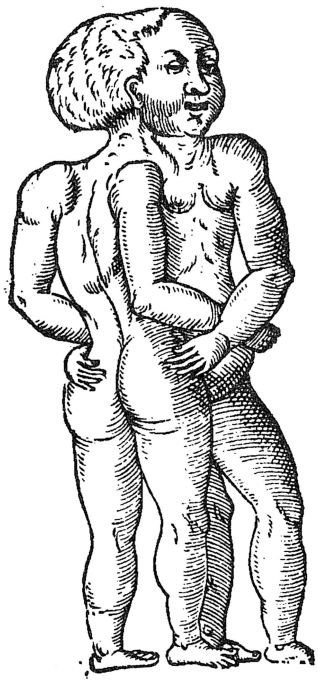

Figure 2. Figure of two twins having only one head, from Paré 15. Compare *Othello* 1.1.115-7: "Your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs."

even read the medical discourse of obstetrical monstrosity proleptically into the act of "unnatural" procreation itself; that is the point of his famous euphemism for sex, "making the beast with two backs" (1.1.116-7; cf. figure 2), for this compact and poisonous description endows the lovemaking of Othello and Desdemona with a deformity prefiguring that of the equine offspring the lovemaking will purportedly produce.

To this extent, Iago's reliance upon a medico-juridical vocabulary of sexual monstrosity may even foreshadow the later development of a Foucauldian *scientia sexualis*, the vast disciplinary project — of transforming sex into an object of dispassionate scientific observation — that Foucault found to be characteristic of western societies from the eighteenth century onward.[7] As Jurgis Baltrusaitis has demonstrated, the teratology of authors like Paré derives from a medieval mode of "réalisme fantastique" supplemented by "l'eveil d'une pensée réaliste" (331), and this particular discursive quality, the very concern for professional observation and documentation that distinguishes Iago's source material from Othello's, allies the former with an emergent scientific discourse of undeniable power and prestige. In his meditation upon the social constructedness of sexuality, Foucault contrasted this western *scientia sexualis* with an eastern *ars erotica* exemplified by sex treatises such as the *Kama Sutra* (57-8), and it would be tempting to discover a similar opposition in *Othello*. However, what Shakespeare gives us is less an *ars erotica* than an eroticized *ars narrandi*, through which Othello, too, like Iago, can activate a vocabulary of physical monstrosity:

> of antres vast and deserts idle,
> Rough quarries, rocks, [and] hills whose [heads] touch heaven,
> It was my hint to speak — such was my process —
> And of the Cannibals that each [other] eat,
> The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
> [Do grow] beneath their shoulders. (1.3.140-5)

As Lisa Hopkins has recently noted, Othello's character "is inserted into pre-existing discourses of travel that must radically inform and structure his ostensibly experiential account. Even as Othello thinks he tells his story, it in fact tells him" (163). Yet, as I have just pointed out, one may say precisely the same thing about Iago. Ultimately what separates Othello from Iago in this

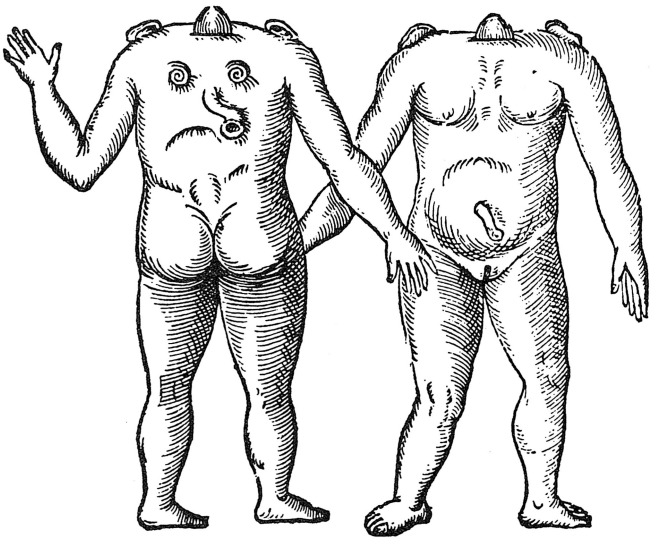

Figure 3. Figure of a female monster without a head, front and back views, from Paré 36. This illustration may be viewed as a pathologized counterinstance of Othello's "men whose heads / [Do grow] beneath their shoulders" (1.3.144-5).

respect is not so much their subjection to narrativity but rather the precise *kind* of narrativity to which they are subject; Othello's monsters remain distinct from Iago's, both with regard to their ontological status and their literary antecedents. As to the latter of these points, Othello clearly draws upon different source material than does his ancient: not the discourse of medical abnormality (cf. figure 3) and theologico-judicial censure, but rather that of the medieval travelogue and bestiary tradition. Moreover, this preference for certain kinds of source matter has broad implications for the nature of monstrosity itself, which emerges in Othello's language not as an index of individual depravity and perversion but as an emblem of the breadth and diversity of creation. Where Iago's monsters narrow the world — dividing it into the familiar and the perverse, the former to be protected and the latter to be eradicated — Othello's monsters widen it, attesting to the lure of the exotic as well as to Othello's own ability to render the fantastic accessible. To this extent Othello's handkerchief is like his Anthropophagi — a narrative construct whose strangeness carries with it a charge of erotic fascination even as it conflates the fabulous with the quotidian:

> That handkerchief
> Did an Egyptian to my mother give;
> She was a charmer, and could almost read
> The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it,
> 'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
> Entirely to her love. . . .
> [T]here's magic in the web of it.
> A sibyl, that had numb'red in the world
> The sun to course two hundred compasses,
> In her prophetic fury sew'd the work;
> The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
> And it was dy'd in mummy which the skillful
> Conserv'd of maiden's hearts. (3.4.55-60, 69-75)

Again here, as in his speech to the Venetian senate, Othello uses the storytelling function to collapse distances and elide contexts. The gift of Othello's handkerchief is in part the gift of its story, which in turn is the story of its gift, from sibyl to Egyptian charmer to Othello's mother to Othello's father to Othello himself to Desdemona, the story of this gift ending with the gift's origins and being entirely prefigured in the "prophetic fury" of the sibyl's work, which in turn is repeated within the myriad retellings of the tale it has itself anticipated. Likewise, Othello's storytelling once again draws upon particular sources, its evocation of Egypt and enchantment and the "mummy" drawn from maiden's hearts all suggesting that great original of western travel writers, Herodotus, and the tradition of travelogue and romance descending from his work. In the case of Othello's handkerchief-narrative, the nature of the storytelling has shifted a bit; it has begun to assume a threatening cast, not simply inviting Desdemona to identify with it but also browbeating her for not having identified with it closely enough. This fact may in itself bear witness to the strain under which Othello's narrative invention has been placed by Iago's insinuations, but it also attests to the extraordinary quality of the narrative itself. Othello's tale may attach an impossibly heavy weight of meaning to something as common and trivial as a handkerchief, but that, in a sense, is Othello's function as a dramatic character: to transform everything into a kind of thick description. His signature gestures — the characteristic recourse to a narrative function that conflates disparate times and places and people by giving them common and endlessly recursive roles within the narrative itself; the reliance upon a literary tradition grounded in catalogues of marvels such as those assembled by the travelogue writer and the bestiarist; and the tendency to dwell upon tales of the strange, wondrous, and marvelous in such a way as to render them attractively exotic rather than repulsively unnatural — all of these combine to produce a particular rhetorical effect, an unusually powerful drive toward what Burke has called "the transcending of social estrangement."

In the final section of this essay, I will try to characterize the apparent objective of this rhetorical function more precisely, and to do so I must move beyond the rhetorical analysis of Burke to a more recent theoretical vocabulary, developed by Deleuze and Guattari specifically to provide a means of thinking beyond the construction of individual character and personal identity.

4.

Unlike Burke, whose concerns lie mostly with the form and nature of rhetoric as it is, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari seek to theorize an alternative to the social relations that make such rhetoric possible. If Burke views "standoffishness" as a precondition of all linguistic appeal, Deleuzian analysis might well argue that that is because Burke describes language as a product of "state philosophy" (*Thousand Plateaus* xi): that is, as a structure of meaning predicated upon the unity and self-identity of "the thinking subject," an identity that is recapitulated in the concepts the subject creates "and to which it lends its own presumed attributes of sameness and constancy" (*Thousand Plateaus* xi). In

short, if language nourishes an irreducible alienation of the speaking subject, that is because language itself is first and foremost not a means of "transcending social estrangement" (this being only a secondary and incidental effect of linguistic appeal) but in fact a means of fabricating the unitary "I." For any subject operating in the world of Burkean rhetoric, ego-construction is the first — and last — order of business, its primacy merely confirmed by the rhetorical drive to overcome the alienation that defines it.

But might it be possible to deploy language so that it does not "immure itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority" (*Thousand Plateaus* xii)? Could one remove the principle of standoffishness from its position as simultaneously the motivating force and the preeminent product of semiotic exchange? To do so, Deleuze and Guattari argue, one must re-theorize identity and its relation to linguistic expression, a relation whose traditional commitment to ideas of interiority is signaled by the etymology of the word "expression" itself (from *exprimere*, literally "to press out"). The challenge here is to rethink the subject as a multiple and mutable construct, formulated through relations of externality and through a logic of metonymy rather than metaphor. Deleuze and Guattari thus lend particular privilege to tropes of flight and escape, both literal and figurative, that lead from an ordered and therefore restrictive center to a variously conceived outside. In Deleuzian terminology, the ordered center comes to be known as a "territory": that is, an enclosed material or biological or spatial or linguistic or conceptual space to which have been assigned particular structural principles and qualities (of identity, property, value, etcetera). The practice of flight from such enclosures, on the other hand, is what Deleuze and Guattari call "deterritorialization." In the last few pages of this essay, I would like to suggest that the latter concept offers a useful way of understanding Othello's approach to narrative, which is more complex than standard alienation-based semiotic models give it credit for being.[8]

In one sense, Othello's commitment to patterns of exteriority is obvious enough. He is, as Iago notes, "of a free and open nature" (1.3.399), and this openness contrasts markedly with Iago's guardedness and duplicity. What one sees of Othello is what one gets, up to and including a physical blackness surprisingly free from any pejorative significance as an external index of personal character or racial inclination. (As Janet Adelman has recently demonstrated, the pejorative racial associations in Shakespeare's play originate with Iago, for whom they externalize a sense of inward deficiency that can be well accounted for by object-relations psychology.)[9] In effect, the story of Othello's downfall is the story of how he loses this exteriorized sense of self, exchanging it for the paradigm of self-division that informs Iago's character. As Hopkins has put it, Iago "is able to effect a gradual shift in Othello's horizons of narrative expectation" (168). The end result of this shift is that Othello and Desdemona engage in a pattern of sustained misunderstanding, recently traced by Harry Berger, Jr. ("Trifling" passim), whereby they conspire to lose — and then to forget that they have conspired to lose — Desdemona's handkerchief. To this extent, Iago manages to install a kind of linguistic self-interference in Othello's and Desdemona's relationship; he makes their own words conspirators against them.

But as far as Othello's own instincts are concerned, signs are not separate from subjects, nor signifiers from signifieds: instead, "signs are 'embedded' in

situations, not fully separated from bodies, specific places, rituals, gestures, stories, etcetera, yet not entirely fixed in their relationship to one another" (Bogue 98). Again, Desdemona's handkerchief offers an outstanding case in point. On one hand, its significance is inextricable from the bodies, places, and rituals with which it is associated, yet at the same time those bodies, places, and rituals shift place in and through and around each other. Thus, for one thing, it becomes naggingly difficult to track the feminine pronoun references in Othello's description of the handkerchief:

> That handkerchief
> Did an Egyptian to my mother give;
> She was a charmer, and could almost read
> The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it,
> 'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
> Entirely to her love . . . (3.4.55-60)

This peculiar array of linguistic shifters manages to fix the meaning of the handkerchief by attaching a massive weight of personal importance to it. Yet at the same time, Othello's language generates this personal importance not out of a single, singular individual, but rather out of an accumulated weight of persons, so that the final feminine pronoun in this same passage (72), amazingly, refers neither to Othello's mother nor to the "Egyptian charmer," but to the "sibyl" who sewed the handkerchief that the charmer gave to Othello's mother. Thus it is perhaps an appropriate final irony that when Othello mentions the handkerchief again, its meaning remains the same — it is a love token whose loss represents the loss of love itself — but its history has been revised via an entirely different set of personal associations: "It was a handkerchief, an antique token / My father gave my mother" (5.2.216-7).

In cases such as this, narrative representation works for Othello much as it does in the Deleuzian account of signification in primitive communities. Othello's tale proceeds collectively and extra-personally, along lines of transfer in which individual bodies are important precisely insofar as they can stand in and for one another. As Deleuze and Guattari observe,

> A Gourma story begins: "When the mouth was dead, the other parts of the body were consulted to see which of them would take charge of the burial. . . ." The unities in question are never found in persons, but rather in *series* which determine the connection, disjunctions, and conjunctions of organs. (*Anti-Oedipus* 142)

This sort of relation, which Deleuze and Guattari term "plurivocal," characterizes primitive modes of representation in which the body stands first and foremost as "a part of the earth" upon which various situationally specific marks of relation and alliance may be coded. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari argue, "Our modern societies have undertaken a vast privatization of the organs" (142-3), a privatization of which I consider Iago to be an outstanding dramatic representative.

Again, one may liken the effect of Othello's storytelling to a classic example of deterritorialization drawn from the field of biology. Deleuze and Guattari point out that certain tropical wasps and orchids formulate a symbiotic relationship that also involves an element of physical mimicry (*Thousand Plateaus* 10 [see figure 4]). What distinguishes this relationship, however, is not so much the obvious quality of physical resemblance but rather the symbiosis that the resemblance renders visual; the wasp, feeding upon the orchid, transfers pollen that reproduces the plant, while the plant, propagating itself through the transfer of pollen, yields life-sustaining nectar to the wasp. The mimicry in this relationship is neither a cause nor an effect nor a vehicle of the symbiosis; wasps can pollinate flowers without looking like them, and flowers can nourish wasps without looking like them. What seems to be enacted in this particular case, thus, is not a simple relation of interdependence, nor a simple relation of mimicry, but something more complex: a moment in which the wasp becomes an orchid, completing the orchid's reproductive cycle and entering into an association of physical resemblance, just as the orchid performs a reciprocal act of becoming-wasp. As Deleuze and Guattari comment upon such cases, "A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification. . . . We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself . . . , not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes" (237-8).

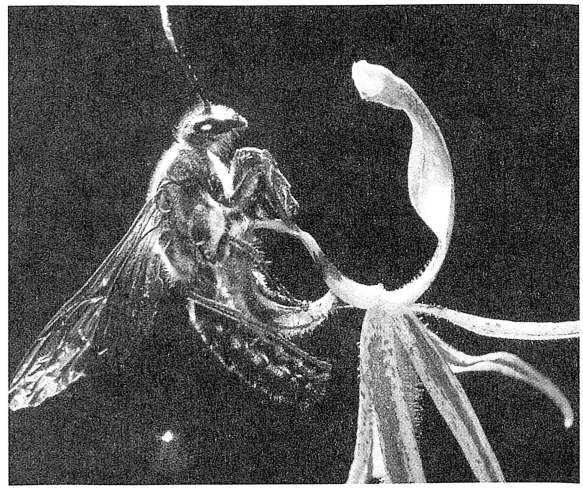

Figure 4. Wasp-orchid rhizome. Comme des Garçons.

If nothing else, Deleuze and Guattari's model of symbiotic transformation affords us a new perspective on the Moor's intimacy with Desdemona. That relationship is founded, after all, upon the linguistic complementarity of husband and wife; Desdemona wishes "[t]hat heaven had made her such a man" as Othello (1.3.162), thus locating herself within a process of becoming-Othello to which the Moor himself contributes in describing her as his "fair warrior" (2.1.182). (As Iago observes with disapproval, "Our general's wife is now the general" [2.3.315-6]). Moreover, such language points to the very literal deterritorialization of space — and of personal relation to space — that accompanies Desdemona's elopement. For not only does marriage translate Desdemona out of the protective enclosure of her father's house and into the midst of a military campaign upon foreign soil; it also alters her scripted relation to the space she inhabits. Hence her initial encounters with Othello are constrained by her obligation to perform house-

work — "Still the house affairs would draw her thence, / Which ever as she could with haste dispatch, / She'd come again and with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse" (1.3.147-50) — while her personal role in Cyprus, on the contrary, is most prominently distinguished by her vigorous intercessions on behalf of Cassio. This substitution of outside for inside, of foreign ground for homeland, and of military command decisions for household chores involves an escape from concurrently encoded, mutually reinforcing notions of domestic and national and sexual and vocational territory, and to this extent it may easily be described in terms of Deleuzian lines of flight.

If her relationship with Othello offers Desdemona a way out of social and spatial confinement, in turn, that is because the storytelling function of Othello's character offers her a line of flight of a particularly far-reaching variety: a means of "transcending social estrangement" that reconfigures the selves who participate in it, rather than simply reinforcing a defensive alienation coextensive with the signifying process itself. In short, for Othello and Desdemona there seems to be something consciousness-altering about the business of telling stories: something expansive and liberating and capable of reconfiguring the terms within which one experiences the world. It is not my purpose here to argue that Othello's narrative gift necessarily affects a theater audience in similar fashion, but it is certainly worth considering the circumstances under which a dramatist could invest the telling of tales with the peculiar rhetorical properties that it clearly possesses for Shakespeare's tragedy. At the least, such circumstances may say something about how narrativity could be theorized — and perhaps even experienced — in the Jacobean theater.

In the first instance, then, we may recall that Othello's stories, with their propensity to fold time and space, repeat the signature gestures of Shakespearean metatheatrical discourse. From *Henry V*'s rhetorical question, "Can this cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France?" (Prologue.11-12) to Peter Quince's claim in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that "This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring-house" (3.1.3-4), Shakespeare's dramatic technique famously superimposes the foreign ground of fictional narrative upon a fundamentally bare theatrical space. This theatrical space, in turn, drew its audience appeal from linguistic representation to a degree that twentieth-century readers and playgoers, accustomed as we are to different conventions of dramatic performance, may easily underestimate; as Stephen Orgel has noted, "[t]heater in 1605 was assumed to be a verbal medium. And acting . . . was a form of oratory" (16-17). This fact, in turn, implies a particularly tight homology between Othello's narrative performances for Desdemona, Brabantio, etcetera and the narrative performances that were the stock in trade of the Shakespearean public theater. Thus, developing within a social context in which its closest analogues and (to the disgust of antitheatrical Puritans) competitors for audience attention included such spoken-word media as preaching, ballad singing, and secular oratory, Shakespeare's theater discovers its own double in the character of Othello. A Deleuzian model of deterritorialization may thus expand our understanding of how the Renaissance theater could be intuitively apprehended by its writers and actors and possibly even some of its viewers.

In other words, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming may hold implications not only for the dramatic relationship between Othello and Desdemona but also for the practical relationship between the forms and the objects of Shakespearean theatrical representation. To think of storytelling as a process of becoming is, given the predominantly linguistic nature of the Renaissance public theater, to suggest that we may understand the stage in the same way: not simply as a space of imitation; nor as a vehicle for what Deleuze and Guattari call "a correspondence between relations" (whereby, for example, Richard Burbage, playing Othello, might address a Globe audience in a way that recapitulates the relations between the character Othello and *his* various audiences); nor as a space of Burkean "courtship," in which every effort at the transcendence of social estrangement is recuperated into a parallel gesture of ego-construction. Instead, using Othello as a model, we might propose an alternative view of the Shakespearean theater organized not through the structural dichotomy of being and imitation, but through the more fluid and indeterminate process of Deleuzian becoming. If nothing else, this fluidity and indeterminacy may help to account for the peculiar emotional and political charge associated with the early English popular theater both by its advocates and its detractors, for both groups arguably find themselves responding, in different ways, to the theater's capacity for rendering human relations transspecific, transpersonal and to this extent transhuman as well. I believe this mode of theatrical experience is particularly well represented in Othello's final speech.

5.

Othello's last words comprise his crowning achievement as a storyteller because they challenge most directly the distinction between actor and character (or, in more purely narrative terms, between subject and object of representation). In this respect one may recall Robert Weimann's analysis of Shakespearean *Figurenposition*, the spatial disposition of the actor's body so as to "generate a unique stage presence that establishes a special relationship between himself and his fellow actors, the play, or the audience" (230). For Weimann, this special relationship is an outgrowth of the traditional opposition between upstage and downstage positions (*locus* and *platea*) in the medieval theater, and it leads to a continuum of dramatic representation that on one end (the *platea*) privileges an actor's interaction with his audience and at the other extreme privileges the character's interaction with other characters. Harry Berger, Jr. has recently revisited this distinction in order to observe that the actor, as actor, cannot be so easily scripted into an exclusive relationship with the audience, for the simple reason that in his role as a dramatic character the actor is always inevitably and simultaneously interacting both with other dramatic characters and with other actors. As Berger asks, "Is Hamlet as Hamlet aware of his fellow actors or of his fellow characters?" ("The Prince's Dog" 48). The question is ultimately unanswerable, for in Deleuzian terms actor and character deterritorialize one another, forming a theatrical parallel to the mutually sustaining relationship of orchid-wasp to wasp-orchid. As I have argued above, this relationship is also

refigured, on the level of character alone, through the interaction of Othello and Desdemona.

In short, the actor threatens to disrupt the essential "standoffishness" or "division" constitutive of Burkean rhetoric, for the actor himself is always already subject to multiple ego-structures and multiple modes of articulation. If, as Deleuze and Guattari maintain, "the unconscious itself [is] fundamentally a crowd" (*Thousand Plateaus* 29), the actor renders this tendency toward proliferation particularly explicit, and with threatening implications for any unitary, self-identified notion of character or personality. With his final words, thus, Othello elides the roles of actor and character in a way that also forces an elision between character and audience. "Soft you; a word or two before you go" (5.2.338) introduces his speech with a pronoun reference that points ambivalently to the character Lodovico, who is about to bear the wounded Iago off to torture, and to an audience that is likewise preparing to depart the theater as the play's performance draws to an end, while the very next line — "I have done the state some service" — arguably registers parity between Othello's role as a servant of the Venetian senate and the King's Men's role as servants of the English crown. Having thus, in his speech's preamble, made available an elaborate parallelism between the roles of actor, characters, and audience, Othello then proceeds to a series of requests, commands, and declarations that render these roles not only parallel but inextricable and mutually sustaining.

"I pray you, in your letters, / When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am" (340-2): Othello asks Lodovico to "relate" his deeds in "letters" that "speak" of him accurately, and the juxtaposition of contradictory modes of discourse, one (the written) appropriate to Lodovico and another (the spoken) more fitting to a theater audience, is arguably more than coincidence. The operative verb "speak" reappears one line later ("Then must you speak / Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well" [343-4]), whereas Othello can revert to a clear reliance upon the written word eight lines after that ("Set you down this" [351]); as a reader or spectator tracks these usages from writing to speaking to speaking and back again to writing, their aggregate effect is to superimpose audience upon character. Moreover, in their form as commands or exhortations dictating a particular spoken or written message, these constructions elide audience with actor; each onlooker, recalling and relating to others the events of Othello's death, steps into the position prepared for him/her by the actor performing the role of Othello: "Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice" (342-3). Telling his own story to us, Othello anticipates us (and Lodovico) telling it in turn to others, in the parallel universes of extratheatrical reality and of dramatic fiction, and we, by telling the story in our turn, not only recapitulate and perpetuate the narrative function exemplified by Othello himself but also enact the future events demanded by the play's own narrative impulse.

This complicated pattern of anticipation and interdependence may also repeat itself in Othello's disparaging references to ethnic others: the "base [Indian]" (or, in the Folio reading, "Judean") who, like Othello, "threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" (347-8); and the "malignant and . . . turban'd Turk" whom Othello recalls slaying in Aleppo (353). On one hand, these

remarks clearly register the sense of ethnic inferiority that Othello has acquired by the end of his play; in dispraising the "base [Indian]" and "malignant . . . Turk," Othello dispraises himself. Yet this dispraise simultaneously functions as the vehicle for an assertion of superiority; Othello rises above his base and malignant self by repeating a gesture of punishment drawn from his own past, and by doing so he renders the relations between actor, character, and audience more involuted than ever. "I took by th' throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him — thus" (355-6): who is the actor here? Is it Burbage playing the role of Othello, or is it Othello playing the role of Othello, or is it Othello playing the role of the "circumcised dog" who receives punishment from Othello in his role as Othello, or Burbage who, as Othello playing the "circumcised dog," receives punishment from himself? And who is the audience? Is it the actor playing Lodovico, or is it the Venetian senate whose judgment Othello anticipates, or is it the Othello who anticipates and preempts that senate's judgment, or is it the Globe audience whose judgment Othello likewise anticipates and seeks to influence or preempt through his performance — an audience that in its judiciary capacity inevitably recapitulates the workings of the senate to which Othello's words are also addressed?

The moral of this essay is not that any one of these notions of actor, or character, or audience must prevail, nor is it that *Othello* successfully achieves a sustainable discursive condition in which the "standoffishness" of Burkean rhetoric is rendered void. But I would, at the least, maintain that *Othello* envisions the possibility of such a condition, and that through the startling narrative juxtapositions and conflations of its principal character, the play offers us a glimpse of what such a condition might be like. In the process, too, it may give us a kind of insight into Shakespeare's intuitive sense of the theater: of its appeal and function, and the peculiar nature of the power it may exert over actors and audiences alike. At any rate, one thing is clear: Othello's storytelling, for whatever reason, exerts a time-tested ability to manipulate his auditors, insisting that they become storytellers — *his* storytellers — in turn. It is an insistence to which this essay, like others before it, cannot help but respond.

Notes

1. In the case of Lacan, desire exists as the unassuageable consequence of the speaking subject's entry into consciousness and the symbolic order. It develops through the infant's mirror-stage estrangement from its mother as well as from the self-estrangement consequent upon linguistic representation, and it provides the enduring sense of lack that linguistic utterance is designed to repair upon immediate local levels, but which stands as the ultimately ineradicable precondition for utterance itself. Thus, for Lacan, "Discontinuity . . . is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon" (25), while the idea of a unitary consciousness develops as "a sort of double of the organism in which this false unity is thought to reside" (26). For Derrida, the immediate focus of *différance* is the formal self-estrangement of the signifying function: the fissure that opens up in linguistic representation

between signifier and signified, the latter of which is primordially different from and deferred by the former, with the result that "[t]he center [of a signifying function] is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality . . . , the totality has its center elsewhere" (279). The priority of estrangement within both of these theories of language and consciousness helps to relate them to Burkean analysis.

2. For a range of noteworthy examples, see Greenblatt 222-54; Sinfield 29-51; Wayne 153-79; Bates 51-60; and Hopkins 159-74.

3. See Sedgwick 35, for instance: Shakespeare's "[s]onnets present a male-male love that, like the love of the Greeks, is set firmly within a structure of institutionalized social relations that are carried out via women: marriage, name, family, loyalty to progenitors and posterity, all depend on the youth's making a particular use of women that is not, in the abstract, seen as opposing, denying, or detracting from his bond to the speaker." In this context, "women are merely the vehicles by which men breed more men, for the gratification of other men" (33).

4. Bruce Smith is only one of many recent scholars who have noted that "[n]o one in Shakespeare's day would have labeled himself a 'homosexual.' The term itself is a clinical, scientific coinage of the clinical, scientific nineteenth century. 'Bugger' and 'sodomite,' the closest equivalents in early modern English, . . . [lack] exactitude, since 'buggery' was also used to refer to bestiality and 'sodomy' could cover a variety of heterosexual acts. . . . For individuals and their self-identity this definition, or lack of definition, had enormous consequences" (11). Thus, as Alan Bray has noted, "To talk of an individual in this period as being or not being 'a homosexual' is an anachronism and ruinously misleading" (16).

5. Carol Neely, for one, thus notes that "Iago offers to compensate" for Othello's loss of Desdemona "with his own love," and that act 3, scene 3 "concludes with Othello's attempt to replace his love for Desdemona with a . . . bond with Iago" (91).

6. The relation between discourses of criminality and morbidity is pervasive in the Renaissance, as well as being fundamentally theological in nature. In his study of birth abnormalities, for instance, Paré claims that "most often these monstrous and marvelous creatures proceed from the judgment of God, who permits fathers and mothers to produce such abominations from the disorder that they make in copulation, like brutish beasts, in which their appetite guides them, without respecting the time, or other laws ordained by God and Nature" (5). Thus Paré's medical abnormalities serve to punish criminality, just as Coke's laws serve to punish "unnatural" and "sinful" behavior: "Buggery is a detestable and abominable sin . . . against the ordinance of the Creator and order of nature" (Coke sig. I3v).

7. See Foucault passim, especially 53-73.

8. Lisa Hopkins, in particular, claims that Iago's approach to narrative representation is "far more sophisticated" than Othello's (168), which figures "narration [as] a transparent mode" (163). Yet Hopkins also rightly observes that Iago "is a poorer narrator and stager than Othello" (168), and the present essay seeks to account for Othello's narrative gift as something other than a lack of sophistication.

9. For Adelman, "Othello's black skin" comes, through the process of projection, to serve as "the container for [Iago's] own interior blackness" (130): "Insofar as Iago can make Othello experience his own blackness as a contamination . . . , he succeeds in emptying himself out into Othello" (144).

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